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ABSTRACT

Written to encourage imaginative approaches to teaching writing, this paper contains ideas for developing writing skills by encouraging creative writing, formal analysis, and criticism despite the traditional lack of literary analysis in the creative writing classroom. In addition to including teaching techniques for practicing literary skills useful to creative writing students, contents include discussion, assignment, and resource ideas explaining how to use this method for developing free-flowing and imaginative writing. (RB)

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PRACTICING LITERARY SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

a paper presented by

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of

Austin Peay State University

as a part of

Panel ~~18~~ 5:

Literature in Composition Courses

at the

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CS 201 323

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I used to spend each fall term reading hundreds of student papers like Karen Kempf's:

> College is like a mountain to be climbed. You have to be very careful and know where you are going. You have to take a certain step before you can take another. You have to be a Freshman before you can be a sophomore. And you will have to face all the conflicts and handle them before you can go on to the next class. You have to be careful not to slip back and fail.

I waded through thousands of vague generalizations and shallow perceptions like this, and I despaired. And I always decided that students like Karen were hopelessly stupid and unimaginative. Once I had pigeon-holed Karen and her fellows as D or F students, they usually stayed there; they too thought they were stupid.

But this September, after two years as a poet in the schools, I read Karen's paper and did not despair. I set aside prejudice, pulled Karen out of her pigeon-hole, and gave her a push. In her second piece, written off the cuff during the first eight minutes of class, Karen took off:

> I left my home this morning in my $40,000 limousine and headed for the ice house. There I got coffee I had left warming over the fire. Afterwards I went for my morning jog around the world stopping only to have my tennis shoes recapped. Ice was forming on my nose as I rounded Africa and began to melt as I passed Santa Claus's house. I had a blowout on my left sneaker, so I had to convert my glasses into a small helicopter which carried me safely back home.

Suddenly she was writing with imaginative perception and vivid detail, and most of the other students' papers were as well detailed as hers. How did it happen? I asked the class to do a free writing with only one restriction: they must tell only lies. I had had great success with this assignment -- borrowed from Kenneth Koch's Wishes, Lies, and Dreams -- in the public schools, but I had never tried it in college. It worked, I found, just as well with my freshmen as it had with fifth graders.

But why? A student writes vividly and specifically when he is allowed and encouraged to be imaginative or "crazy," to use Koch's word. Ironically, the pressure to be serious and profound, to write like Winston Churchill and other writers in textbooks, to pretend -- in other words -- to be something he isn't, encourages, even compels a student to indulge in lazy thinking and writing. Yet a student writing from his own mind and imagination and in his own voice will write with striking detail and surprising liveliness. Once he sees that his imagery communicates and delights, once he gains confidence in his ability to use language to help a reader visualize, then he takes courage to write vividly of the real world as well as imaginary worlds, as Karen did later in the term in this sketch:

> I remember the scratchy bacon waking me up. A block of sunlight lay on the floor. Pepper, my rabbit, was thumping his foot in the closet. My feet hit the cold, stinging floor. I felt water soothe my dry throat, and I could hear the crunching of crackers in the kitchen like a small fire flaming up.

Karen was acquiring that keen sense of detail a good writer must have.

II

Donald Hall says in "Writing Poems," an article for The Writer, that "an excellent way to learn to read poems is to try to write them." He says further that the only justification for a course in creative writing is that it helps a reader better understand literature. I believe the converse, also: The justification of a literature course is that it helps a reader find the poet, playwright, and story teller within himself so that he may begin to see with an artist's eyes and thus better understand what artists show him. Likewise, a composition course should expose a student to the great variety of ways writers of all genres work -- and play -- with language.

The best way to give a student at least a little of the writer's vision and skill is to have him work with language as a writer does. I should emphasize as a writer does and make here a distinction between writers and critics, between the way a writer sees and composes and the way some critics and authors of textbooks apparently think a writer works. Frost says it well in the introduction to The Complete Poems:

> Scholars and artists are often annoyed at the puzzle of where they differ. Both work from knowledge; but I suspect they differ most importantly in the way

> their knowledge is come by. Scholars get theirs with conscientious thoroughness along projected lines of logic; poets theirs cavalierly and as it happens in and out of books. . . . Knowledge of the second kind is much more available in the wild free ways of wit and art.

Critics sometimes give the impression that a writer is more consciously aware of technique than he may be. The creative process is hard to analyze and understand; in fact, we may find it possible only by participating -- to some extent, at least -- in the process. Man learns best by doing. By creating with words, we will learn to allow the subconscious to give us our best insights; we will learn to expect happy accidents to give us our best phrases; we will find the emotional truth in the illogicality of figurative expression as Richard Jordan, one of Karen's classmates, did in one of his "lies":

> My wife is a balloon. When she gets mad I let the air out and put her in a drawer.

Our mistake has been the assumption that only a select few can participate in the creative process, but the experience and data of the hundreds of writers working in the schools show that assumption to be false.

I am not saying we should try to make every student a poet or novelist. I simply want students at any level and in any class to get a taste of imaginative writing for insight into the literature he reads and into his own abilities and powers as a writer. It doesn't matter how good a student is in his imaginative writing; his work, his participation, is an end in itself.

¶ Assignments in imaginative writing should always be secondary to other work and should always be presented as informal "recreation" because students do better work and learn more from it if they don't realize they are working and learning. My students concentrated harder on being specific in their "lie" papers (without my asking them to) than they had on formal writing assignments. But while they thought their lackadaisical effort on a formal essay was <u>work</u>, the energetic work on the lies they called <u>fun</u>. There's no need to analyze this paradox; we should simply accept it and let it work to our advantage.

Informal imaginative writing and formal analysis and criticism can and should go together despite the traditional separation of the two. One Friday afternoon I asked my students to relax and write a ten-minute free writing -- a crazy, weird story with three different but related characters. We read the stories, enjoyed them, and went on to discuss the variety of ways the students had organized their papers. Our minds are so thoroughly trained to work in logical, structured patterns that even when we write bizarre fantasy, we automatically design and shape the piece.

Grant Winston's story was the most imaginative and at the same time the most essayistic in organization, a striking blend of illogical absurdities and traditional structure:

> Three little children sitting in their cribs invented the A-bomb all over again. They blew up their mommy and bit the dog and burned the house. Sunday came and they grew up to be three young gentlemen who never used slang or told lewd jokes in mixed company. They all wore

suits of green with black shoes and argyle socks.

One became a European monk who lived under a grape orchard and drank himself to death while reciting proverbs to his pet frog.

Another became minister of defense to the little known Asiatic country of Lower Fiblavia. He led his country to destruction when he bombarded it with waste matter from 5,000,000 Indian elephants.

Still another became the champion hair splitter of Cornered Circle, Idaho and split hair eighteen hours a day for 25¢ a hair. But because of the little demand for hair splitters he starved to death and was buried under a Brylcreem billboard.

So the three little children now lie waiting, waiting for three little children to invent the A-bomb all over again.

In class discussion of this piece the students discovered not only the tripartite structure, but also the allegory. To their surprise Grant had not intended allegorical meanings -- not consciously anyway. But it was clear that the allegory was there, whether it was the product of the conscious mind or the subconscious. We were on the way toward dispelling that nagging doubt and fear students express in the question, "But how do we know what the author really meant?"

The discussion also led to the discovery that literature which seems silly or "dumb" at first may on second thought be quite sensible and true; and someone pointed out that it was the detail that made it lively and that the humor derived from the absurd specificity of the detail.

If that doesn't sound like what you'd expect of a class of college freshmen, you're right. And wrong. It was an average class of juniors -- in high school.

For a long time -- far too long -- we have believed imaginative writing to be for the select few with talent and inclination and that its place was in an upper division course called "creative writing" and that the proper place for that course was probably outside the scholarly curriculum. I say, "No." Imaginative writing has its place in every English course. It should properly be an adjunct to other activities and studies, but it should be there. All men are creative. Man is a simile-maker by nature; his mind was designed to see relationships, to discover insights.

Creativity and scholarly analysis should work in concert. Frost was right to show the difference between scholars and poets; but he was wrong if he meant to suggest that the two ways of gathering and expressing knowledge are mutually exclusive. Any person can be both, and should be. The idea that a person is either one or the other is absurd. It is true each will prefer one way of seeing to the other; but to deny the other mode of thinking altogether is like saying, "Well, I guess I don't have enough talent to make the Olympic track team," and then cutting one's legs off.

III

Scene: Faculty lounge. Situation: two instructors talking shop over coffee; scholar and poet, not so terribly annoyed -- but anxious and concerned. The scene opens in mid-conversation.

P: Assume it's hard and it will be; believe it's easy and it will be.

S: I don't know . . . I'm sure it would be hard for me. My students aren't very creative, and I'm even less creative than they are.

P: How do you know?

S: They've never shown any spark at all.

P: Have you encouraged them to?

S: Shouldn't they just show it? If they're imaginative wouldn't it turn up somewhere?

P: Not if they're suppressing it.

S: But why should they do that?

P: Lots of reasons. Maybe they're afraid. It takes courage, you know; a writer has to take risks.

S: But I don't intimidate them!

P: Probably not. But they've been intimidated for years before they got to you. They've been burned too many times before.

S: Oh, the old school-kills-off-creativity bit, huh?

P: Not quite. School doesn't kill it. Nothing can do that. The imagination is there; it's just buried. It isn't that

your students can't be imaginative; they've only forgotten how.

S: Maybe so. Now how do I get them to remember? I'm not so creative myself.

P: You don't have to be creative, just tolerant and accepting. You can't teach anyone to be creative (since they already are); you can only allow students to be creative. In fact, if you do much more than that you'll ruin everything. The less said about it, the better. Just let it happen.

S: Huh?

P: You get creativity by simply expecting it. Forcing it is a sure way to bury it deeper.

S: But what do I do?

P: Be a poem yourself. Don't ever say, "Today we're going to be creative," or "Let's do some imaginative writing." Don't announce that your expecting them to be clever; just <u>be</u> expectant. Say this: "Write a ten-minute free writing, and tell lies, only lies." That's all. Don't explain. Don't tell but be. If you really believe they can do it, they'll get the message from your tone of voice.

S: That's all?

P: That's all. I know it's a paradox. Living that paradox is half the fun of it.

S: So after they write, then what?

P: Read them, enjoy them, discuss them if you like, put a check in your grade book for everyone who tried at all, no matter how good or bad his piece was. Even though they will learn -- inductively -- from the exercise, even though it will influence and improve the quality of their other work -- subtly and subconsciously -- you should always treat these practice pieces as recreation.

S: You can't fool me. It's a lot harder than you make it sound.

P: It may seem so, at first. What you have to do is trust the poem to happen. And also place a higher value on intuitive thinking -- as a writer does.

S: It would probably help if I were creative . . .

P: But you are. Like your students, you've only forgotten.

S: And how do I regain my imagination?

P: Only one way -- the same way your students are doing it. When they write ten minutes of lies, you sit down and do it too.

S: What?!

P: Sure. You'll learn a lot of things.

S: Like what?

P: First of all you'll see how easy it is. You'll learn that relying on intuition allows for happy accidents. You'll under-

stand that each person's imagination is at a different level of development and that differences in the quality of the writing often reflect that degree of development rather than the amount of innate ability. And you'll find that your students will surprise you, no matter what your expectations. Even when a student misses the point you were hoping for, he often discovers something just as good, even better.

(Pause)

S: I don't believe it.

P: Probably not -- yet. But I'll warn you: Try it one term and you'll be hooked.

S: It all sounds a little scary.

P: From the outside it does look frightening. We are all a bit afraid of expressing ourselves, a bit afraid of our own emotions. But unless we overcome the fear, we aren't really human . . . or happy.

S: And you think we should all try for that?

P: Try -- and more -- keep on trying. Why are we here except to become as human as we can?

S: But <u>all</u> of us?

P: Why not?

S: You're hopelessly optimistic!

P: I know. I enjoy it.

S: And I guess I'm too cynical for this.

P: Well, when you get tired of being cynical, at least you know what to do to change things.

IV

As it turned out, my colleague came back a week or so later wanting more ideas and suggestions. And I was ready -- with this hand-out. [See following page.] "This," I said, "is just a beginning; but that first step is the only hard one."

CCCC 1974 Panel ~~18~~ 5: "Literature in Composition Courses"

Paper: "Practicing Literary Skills and Techniques"

- Malcolm Glass

BOOKS AND PERIODICAL

Elbow, Peter. Writing Without Teachers. Oxford University Press, 1973.

Koch, Kenneth. Wishes, Lies, and Dreams. Chelsea House, 1971.

Larrick, Nancy (ed.) Somebody Turned a Tap On in These Kids. Delacorte Press, 1972.

The Teachers and Writers Collaborative Newsletter.

Note: Most of these books deal with helping school children write imaginatively and well. Don't let this put you off; the ideas work very well at any level, any age.

ASSIGNMENT IDEAS

It is not necessary for an assignment in imaginative writing to lead directly to another assignment or give insight into a literary device or demonstrate a technique of composition; but to show that it can be done with a variety of topics and problems, here are some sample assignments:

Basic Composition

Precede the writing of an essay explaining a process with a freely written, crazy exposition of directions for human flight; the only restriction is that they must explain a process that doesn't actually work.

Fiction

Have students retell a fairy tale in the style of an author studied (a writer with a markedly distinctive style, of course).

By the way, parodies and imitations (in any genre) are useful and helpful in many ways. Writing a critical study of an author in his style is remarkably successful, and it's obviously a way to get a student to learn many things at once.

Drama

If students claim they don't understand absurdist drama, have

(over)

them write one. See that each student is given an absurd combination of characters and a setting that's partially non-realistic. Then they just write down what these characters say to each other.

Poetry

To help students see surprise, ambiguity, and ironic contrast as elements in poetry, to help them listen to words sounds, and to involve them in the principles and techniques of free verse lineation, there is no simpler nor better way than having them write found poems. (See Ronald Gross' Pop Poems.)

There are other kinds of poetry relatively easy for students to practice -- monologues and dialogues, for example.

Have them practice using figurative language. (Remember not to ask them to write similes; ask them to describe things by saying what they look like, sound like, etc.)

To help them gain an ear for the music of poems, have them write nonsense a la Jabberwocky or Joyce.

For particular poems (or poets), have students write free writings in the mood, theme, or manner of the poem about to be studied; then read and discuss the poem. For example:

A screaming angry outburst followed by Ginsberg.

A letter of confession followed by Lowell, Sexton, or Plath.

A persuasive love letter followed by "To His Coy Mistress."

A freely associative interior monologue (have them assume an appropriate persona if you like) followed by "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

You can also have them write pieces that contrast in some way the poem to be studied. The possibilities are endless. Once you have the students thinking along the right channels or feeling the right mood, the discussion and understanding of the poem (story, play, essay) may be greatly enhanced.

From here on you're on your own; use your imagination. There's no reason why you should ever run out of ideas; the possibilities are as endless as the variety of writing your students read and study.